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ABSTRACT

This is a brief summary of the activities of a NDEA Institute concerning teaching experiences using the biography approach in intermediate grade American History. (SBE)

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Views on Teaching Biographies of Famous Persons in the Elementary Grades

The comments in this article are based on observation of teaching experiences by thirty elementary school teachers in the Campus School of the State University of New York College at Cortland during a recent summer session. The writer and participants were part of an N. D. E. A. Institute in the Teaching of Biography in the elementary school.

As the Education instructor in the History and Education staff, the writer helped to plan and critique thirty individual fifteen-minute video tapes and thirty individual thirty-minute Campus School lessons taught to children in a combined fourth and fifth grade class. It was learned from the final evaluation reports of the participants that they believed the video tapes lessons were their most valuable experience.

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Much use was made of audio-visual materials during the taping sessions. The basic format or sequence consisted of five six-member groups, with each group taking a particular period in American History and presenting a balanced account by relating a key historical personality to his particular period. In one instance dealing with the slavery concept, the children were asked to role play the part of slaves or the role of slaveholders.

Another segment dealt with listening to a record of Thomas Jefferson's life, and then asking pertinent questions to the class.

A unit dealing with the present presidential conventions and the lives of the major candidates was conducted for a full week. Certain children prepared backgrounds on the candidates and read them to the class. Then students voted on their favorite candidates. One result of this technique was the teacher's belief that children could discuss fact questions more easily than questions of a value nature.

Throughout the time the institute was in session, the question arose pertaining to the advisability of using a biography approach in teaching American History in the intermediate grades.

On the negative side, the point was made that young children must be supplied sufficient background to make such learnings of people meaningful. Another point of caution was the possible condition of exagerating the importance of a person by distorting the times in which he lived.

Positive suggestions for using the biography technique were that it might make the child's learning of history more meaningful by studying key person's lives, and the development of democratic attitudes and values might be more successful with such an approach. A constant discussion centered around the issue concerned with whether it was better to teach only the positive sides of our historical heroes, or to strive for a balance of realism.

Also, the question was raised concerning the possible problems that arise in stressing the values of patriotism and critical thinking simultaneously.

One of the major findings of the institute experience was that biography teaching should stress a balance between the person's life and the period in which he is living, and that each teacher should know why he is selecting certain persons to stress in his subject in terms of desired learning outcome.

The point was also stressed that children should be made more aware of how typical people lived and felt about the period in which they were living.

Many of the institute members expressed their feeling of deriving many new ideas and techniques for biography teaching by being able to share their ideas with others and put their ideas to use in actual classroom teaching situations.

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